We Called Her "Grammer"

A Collection of Fond Memories of Katherina Hibbeler Knipp

Written by Louise Robbins Davis (1911-1991)

1984

Scanned by Alton Donnell, 2024

WE CALLED HER "GRAMMER"

One day, when my twin and I went whining to our grandmother about some imagined or real slight, she answered, "Get your chins up and develop a little backbone. If you make a doormat of yourselves, you can be sure people are going to wipe their feet on you. Remember, you are going to meet at least one fool every day because there's one born every minute. Just don't make it two for your minute!"

Our grandmother was what succeeding generations would have called "a go-getter", a "smart cookie", or a "can-do" person. You could call her these things, and more, and still be right. As the need arose, she became carpenter, dairymaid, chef, doctor, nurse, barber, gardener, seamstress, psychologist, disciplinarian, philosopher, and wit. But we called her "Grammer", and we knew there wasn't anything she couldn't do.

She was born Katrina Hibbler on a little farm in northern Germany, but her whole life changed drastically when she was only twelve years old. Her mother's frail health was worsening in the chill, damp climate, so they decided to move to Texas hoping that the warm, dry climate would help control her terrible bouts with "chills and fever".

From the boat in Galveston, the family went inland to Brenham, Texas where many German settlers had already established themselves on good farms and also in businesses. They bought a small farm. At this time, the family was composed of Katrina, her parents, a younger brother, and two little sisters, one just a tiny baby. Every one thought Katrina's mother was responding favorable to the better climate even though she continued to have attacks of chills and

fever. Very little was known about the cause and cure of malaria at that time. However, she lasted less than a year in her new home. One day, Katrina, her brother and her father were working in the field when the little sister called frantically from the back door. Sensing tragedy, Katrina leaped two rows at a time back to the house. Her mother was dead! Lying on the kitchen floor! The baby crawling about her crying and whimpering!

Only thirteen years old, the tiny baby dead and buried close to its mother, a father who refused to accept life in its new status, and with two younger ones to care for, Katrina started working in wealthy neighbor's homes in return for food and clothing. In later years, she talked to us about the linens, the silver, and the fine furniture she helped take care of. Explained how she knew about table settings, antiques, knew the difference between rosewood, mahogany and walnut, and the difference between pottery and fine china. One of my earliest recollections was of grandmother's monthly trips to town and how she always came home with a "find" that she bought with her "butter and egg" money. Today, some of these little treasures are in my home and, in time, will go to my daughter. I wish there was some way to convey the love and sacrifice that went into the acquisition of each piece.

When grandmother left Germany, she had gone through what we call the "sixth grade". In their homeland, darkness came early, and she used to tell of how her grandfather met her every day to guide her through the treacherous peat bogs that lay between their home and the school. Even with such a few years of schooling, Grammer could read and write both English and German and could figure out business deals in her computer-like mind.

The kind neighbors in Texas recognized her ability and her ambition and helped her to speak English with no trace of an accent. However, during one of her reminiscing talks, even though it was fifty years later, there was an intensely frightening flash of anger in her eyes as she told of how some of these "kind" people had slashed the feet of run-away slaves so they could run no more. Some of the men were still hobbling around doing chores, forced into slavery because of their handicap even though they were now "free".

When Katrina was sixteen, her family moved to Cameron, Texas where there was work for all of them. Her father and brother worked on a farm or in the blacksmith shop. Her little sister, Annie, went to live with Dr. and Mrs. Powell where she worked, but lived like a daughter, until she married and moved away. Katrina worked for a while in the Hefley home, but she soon went to work in the home of Henry Knipp, a forty-three year old widower with three small children. Two years later, Henry and Katrina married and had five children of their own.

The next twenty years must have been very difficult, but we never heard her complain about those years. Henry Knipp had been a Prussian soldier from a wealthy German family and some of them questioned the new marriage -- was she of equal station! Grandmother, who did all the corresponding with his family, wrote them in German script saying, "One of the best things about America is that you are judged on what you make of yourself not on what your family has done in the old country".

Grandmother did complain about it when the boy's father whipped them too hard and on the slightest provocation, but she soon put a stop to that. As for herself, once she was kneeling in front of

the fireplace fixing the fire when he told her to do something, and when her response was not immediate, he come over and threatened to slap her. Straightening up with the poker in her hand, she shook it right in his face and made it explicitly clear that she would never ever allow anyone to strike or abuse her.

When our grandfather died, he left her a widow at thirty-eight. She still had her five children at home and in school. The three step-children were grown and gone. In addition to her own children, Grammer always had one or two others who came to stay while they went to school in town. I know of at least eight foster children who kept in contact through letters and visits always expressing their gratitude to her for giving them a chance to go to school.

Our own mother was Grammer's oldest girl. When our daddy died, he was only twenty-eight, and he left mother a widow at age twenty-three. We lived in Brownwood at the time, and since Kathryn, our sister was just three years old and my twin and I were only eighteen months old, Grammer insisted that we move back to Cameron and live with her. Grandmother took over the child care duties, and mother became the bread-winner teaching school for sixty dollars a month. Mother became an outstanding educator serving on committees and boards at county, district and state levels in addition to being a strong classroom teacher. However, when she was making campaign speeches seeking the office of County Superintendent of Schools, a position she held for ten years, she was very hesitant about listing her qualifications or her personal honors or achievements. Grandmother was her strong supporter and said, "It's not bragging to tell the facts, and if you don't blow your own horn, nobody else will".

I remember that many transients used to come to our house for food and work. One of the fellows told us that a path from the railroad tracks was marked in many small towns so that each newcomer would know where to go for help. One thing was taken for granted, each expected, and wanted, to do some kind of work as pay. During the depression of the thirties, jobs were scarce and many educated, ambitious men were forced to "travel" seeking any type of employment.

One day, an especially down-and-out looking fellow came by and Grammer put him to work chopping wood until dinner was ready. He was chewing tobacco and ever so often he would go "Ptooie", and a stream of tobacco juice would clear the woodpile by several feet. My twin and I were sitting on the back steps peeling potatoes and giggling. Our grandmother came flying out the back door, shook us by the shoulders and said, "Don't you ever dare make fun of anyone. Remember, every person you meet knows something you don't know and can do something you can't do and, if you are smart, you'll learn what it is". Then she practically undid all her good philosophy because, just as she closed the back door, she added under her breath, "I don't care if it is just to spit".

It was one of these transients who became the only grandfather we ever knew. He was a railroad engineer from New York who was recovering from injuries sustained in a train wreck. He came to Texas for the climate, lived in a rooming house, and met grandmother when he came to buy milk and butter. My twin and I were only six years old and we simply could not see why two forty-three year olds wanted to marry! All I can remember now is that Grampa became the best friend and playmate that ever lived! He took time to make corn-stalk fiddles, corn-shuck dolls, and spool tractors that were powered by rubber bands! But Grammer was too busy and too overworked to have

time for these little extras. Even when she sat down, she'd say, "I'll darn these socks while I rest a bit". Grampa said that our house had more unused chairs than any place he'd ever seen.

Grammer loved all of us dearly. Never a very demonstrative person, her love was shown through good food, clean clothes, new or patched garments, and by a meticulously clean house -- "If the mirrors are dirty, the house is not clean".

Then there were the tender moments. It was almost worthwhile to stump a toe or cut a finger because of all the loving and kissing that went into making it "well". After supper every night as mother graded papers, my twin and I were bathed in the same Zinc tub that had been sitting in the sun all day to warm the cold well water. Of course, as soap was applied, every toe immediately became a "little pig" and the squealing Grammer did as "the little pig went home" was enough to wake the dead. After the bath came the cuddly, all in one chair, reading time. We knew about "Little Miss Muffet", "The Crooked Man Who Walked a Crooked Mile", "Simple Simon", and about the mouse that went to London just to sit under the Queen's chair.

When we needed correcting, a few spanks with Grammer's hand was more than sufficient. Once when I got a spanking for something that my twin had done, (we were so identical that even our mother would get us mixed up sometimes) I complained about the mistake. All Grammer said was, "Well, no matter. I didn't hit you a lick a-miss".

Grammer never visited except to take food or to do work for any sick person. She was especially helpful to the blacks because "poor people have poor ways" and their needs are greater. Coffee and

small talk were a waste of time unless she could sew or iron while visiting. On the rare occasions when she did go visiting, she was totally unaware of any insult when she'd remark, "I brought my knitting along so I wouldn't feel like I'd wasted the evening".

I don't suppose there was anyone who read more or owned more good books than our grandmother. Every day, as soon as breakfast and the morning chores were done, Grammer read the daily Temple Telegram. If there was an article about teaching or pertaining to some question we'd been debating, she'd underline it or circle it. When we came in, she'd say, "Look at this, it's something you ought to read", or "Read this, you will really enjoy it".

Grammer was not only a voracious reader, she saw to it that books were available for us: Mother Goose to The Bobsey Twins to The Books of Knowledge to The Harvard Classics to the Bible. She said that reading and traveling were two good sources for an education, and since we were too poor to travel, we'd better read a lot. Grammer was very tolerant and sympathetic with innate stupidity but not of ignorance. She always said, "It's not a sin not to know something, but it is a sin not to know where to find out". English was spoken, and spoken correctly always -- unless she and mother wanted to keep a secret from us, then they lapsed into German. Also, when Grammer was completely out of patience with us for some foolish thing we had said or done, she'd say something that sounded like "dumma ganz, dummaganz", and even we knew enough German to recognize "dumb goose", especially when it applied so well.

Another thing that really irritated grandmother was for the people from the old country to talk about the wonders of their old country and to hang on to their native language using English only

when absolutely necessary. Her code to live by was, "America is now your home, speak English, get an education, read the Bible, and remember that the world does not owe you a living". Once, one of grandmother's friends from early immigration days came to see her, and we could hardly understand anything she said because of her foreign accent. After she left, Grammer threw her hands up in the air and said, "She's been in America for forty years and still talks like a Bohunk".

Every small town has its unsavory and peculiar characters, and ours was no exception. Grammer was never unkind in her epithets, but she left very little doubt as to her true feelings. For example, the town trollop was "no better than she ought to be"; the uppity lady who falsely gushed over "the Twins" was "not just nice but nasty nice"; the spoiled neighbor child was "not just spoiled but stinking rotten"; the slew-footed undertaker was "big-foot Brown"; the lazy woman down the street was "a good woman, but good for nothing". And about the enormously fat woman who said she ate "like a bird", Grammer merely raised her eyebrows and said, "The wind will blow up a sand hill, but it never blows up fat people". However, Grammer was very sympathetic about fat persons as a rule. She said that people are just like those hogs out in the pen, "Both pigs are the same age, eat out of the same trough, but one will get twice as fat--he's my lard hog and the other will be the bacon and ham hog".

Once when I asked why old Aunt Hanna had become so thin, Grammer replied, "Honey, she's not sick, she's just going down the western slope".

Grammer knew innumerable proverbs and sayings. Her quotes were not always accurate, but they were always apt -- she knew just how

to adapt each one to fit each new situation. Many times, too, Grammer sang as she worked -- "America", "Yankee Doodle", and others. But she said that "Onward Christian Soldiers" was the best one to work by.

Our ten acres were made to produce almost everything we needed. The pasture and woodlot fed the horses, cows, and chickens during summer, and hay and grain crops were stored for winter feed. Some of the corn was ground for our cornbread. The orchard had pecan, peach, plum, pear and fig trees with berry vines planted between the rows. All surplus fruits and vegetables were canned or dried. Onions were tied by their tops in bunches and hung from the barn rafters. Potatoes were spread evenly under the house where it was cool, dark and dry. They lasted us from season to season. The only purchases I can ever remember being made were sacks of sugar and flour and of fresh beef. Grammer always personally selected the sacked foods picking out those sacks that were nice and smooth in color and quality. Those were used to make our sheets, towels and underwear. Not too long ago when I paid twenty-three dollars for a set of flowered sheets and cases, it brought back many memories.

"Waste not, want not" was Grammer's constant admonition. Twine was tied to the end of the last piece of string and wrapped into a ball. Once, when the ball was about the right size, Grammer sewed a tight cover on it and we played softball with it in the pasture. Tinfoil was formed into a ball also. At this time, plastic was unknown, so many packaged foods came in foil-covered paper. Our gift wrappings were used over and over -- a little ironing and they looked almost new! A feather dipped in machine oil was usually all we needed to keep the clocks in good order. At Easter, the colored, hardboiled eggs were hidden for us to hunt many, many times until,

cracked and dirty, they were peeled and eaten. All egg shells went into a pan to dry, then they were crushed and fed to the hens to supplement their diet. On soap-making day, a big fire was built under the big black washpot, and old grease, lye, and water were stirred and boiled until the mixture was thick and white. After the soap cooled, it was cut into bars and laid out on planks to dry. Some of Grammer's best knives were made from old files that had lost their bite. Grampa put a handle on the pointed end of the file then he ground the metal down to a cutting edge. Grammer said, "If a knife won't rust, it won't keep an edge". She sharpened her knives on the bottom edge of a crock, and they were razor-sharp.

One month our grocery bill for six of us was seventeen dollars and grandmother was horrified. She said we were eating "too high on the hog" and we were going to have to start economizing somewhere!

Grammer was thrifty with her time and energy as well as with her possessions. Every work area was arranged as efficiently as space would permit, and watching her make a bed was an education it itself. She completely made the backside of the bed before going to the frontside, finished up and was gone with the soiled sheets in the same time most people would need just to get started.

Animals played a large part in all of our lives. First, and foremost, animals produced food for us the year round. Lard was stored in large crocks which were kept in the milkhouse. Hams, bacon sausage were hung in the smokehouse. My twin had to collect the bark and chips from the hickory grove, and one of our responsibilities was to keep the smoke-pot going strong.

Grammer had great compassion and skill in dealing with many emergencies that arose concerning all the animals. Old Ross, our

hard-working pet horse was too smart for his own good. One day he pulled the pin out of the barn door latch, went in and foundered on corn. For days, he just stood, bloated and head hanging. The veterinarian said that the horse should be shot as he would never be well again. But Old Ross was our pet, so grandmother rubbed him down daily and wrapped his feet in old rags because he had lost his hoofs. After several long weeks, his head came up, his feet healed, and he was able to plow the soft loamy soil in the garden again.

One day, our dog staggered in to the yard glassy-eyed, shivering, and stiff-legged. Grammer yelled, "Strychnine! Don't let him get to the water". She warmed several cups of bacon grease and literally funneled it into his stomach. The entire contents of his stomach came boiling out, and by dark, our dog was up and wagging his tail.

Another time, the cat crawled into the warm oven to sleep all night. Next morning, Grammer slammed the oven door and built a big, roaring fire in the wood stove. Soon, she heard the cat screaming and ran into the yard to see what was the matter. Not finding the cat, she came back in and knew! When she opened the oven door, the cat fell out, nearly hairless and feet and ears badly burned. Grammer held and doctored the cat for many hours and days, but it never cried. It wasn't too long before, with healed feet and a new coat of hair, we had Blackie back almost as good as new and a great deal wiser. It was about this time that grandmother told us that a calico cat was always a female. It was not until 1924 when Barnum and Bailey Circus offered one thousand dollars to any one who could bring them a male calico cat that anyone believed her.

The most amazing and unbelievable thing happened to a flock of half-grown, half-naked little fryer chickens. We threw out a big

sackful of weevil-eaten black eyed peas, and those greedy chicks ate until their craws were full. Several hours later, their craws were swollen grotesquelly, and the chicks were flopping helplessly on the ground. Grammer calmly collected her scissors, needle and thread, and a small box to sit on. Methodically, she doctored each chicken: she snipped a small hole in the taut skin, squeezed the peas out one at a time, taking a single stitch, and pulling the chick back on its feet. The entire operation took more than an hour, but recovery was one hundred percent.

For our sex education, there was no little talk about the birds and the bees. For one thing, we had seen the animals and their young from birth and had a smattering of what it was all about. But, miraculously, one day a huge doctor's book appeared on a lower shelf in the bookcase -- sort of half hidden. The reading and the pictures in that book were explicit and graphic. We sneaked in every chance we got, but then the book disappeared just as suddenly as it had appeared. It stayed on the shelf long enough for the twins to realize that the stork was just another bird!

Grammer's meteorological ability went past the term "weatherman". A ring around the moon meant rain, and she could predict "when" quite accurately. A hand held vertically against the setting sun told her how many minutes until sundown. If the moon were viewed as a soup-bowl and the soup could pour out, it meant rain; a flat, level moon meant dry weather. And, "of course", everyone knew that if you had three fogs it would rain; and if a strong wind blew from one direction it would surely come back from the other direction just as strong. Three caws in rapid order meant that the crows were expecting a change in the weather. Root vegetables were always planted in the

dark of the moon, and top crops were planted in the light of the moon.

During heavy, threatening thunder showers, a mattress was put on the floor and we three children had to stay on it until it was safe to get off. After one especially bad blow, we got out to find the beautiful beveled glass front door blown out, and about half of the orchard had been uprooted.

One morning, as she quickly collected the clothes for the wash, even though it was pouring rain, we asked about keeping a fire under the wash-pot and about the outdoor clothesline. She said, "Oh, it isn't going to rain long. I know because I saw the chickens run into the shed to keep from getting wet. If it was going to rain all day, they would have stayed out and kept eating."

Her barometer was a small empty bottle inverted into a jar of water. If the air pressure was high, the bottle was pushed higher and moved around crazily. Then she'd say, "Pete, get your fishing pole, the bottle's just a-bobbin'!"

Grandmother was a very religious person, but she was never a fanatic. Everything was thought out and tempered with common sense. She never allowed any rough, ugly talk, and the name of the Lord was never taken in vain. Sunday was a day of rest. Grampa hitched the horse to the surrey, then Grammer piled all of us in and sent us to Sunday School and church. But she was not with us! Our Sunday dinners were always special, and she took great pride in having someone brought home with us from church to eat dinner -- the preacher's family always had priority, of course!

Since working on Sundays was not allowed, I asked her how she could go over to the new mother's house and wash dishes and diapers and do other work that needed to be done. Grandmother calmly replied,

"The ox was in the ditch, but he didn't know it was Sunday". Once, when we all started eating before saying the blessing, Grammer tapped her glass and said, "Just like a bunch of hogs, you never look up to see where the acorns are coming from."

As grandmother was milking the cows late one afternoon, she told my sister, Kathryn, to fill the woodbox. Kathryn climbed up on the pile of neatly stacked wood and began to throw down stick after stick. Grammer called, "Now don't throw down more than you need to take in". After a few more throws, Kathryn went to the cowpen fence and called back through the openings, "Grammer, I've been talking to the Lord and He said you were made to work and I was made to play". Grandmother very carefully put up the milk pail, went over to the fence and quietly said, "Well, you go back and tell the Lord that you have just been talking to your grandmother, and she said that if you didn't take in all that wood, you were going to catch the devil".

Grammer had a keen sense of humor and really appreciated a quick, witty reply. One day she asked my sister to bring a thimble from her sewing basket which was up on the piano. My sister reached into the basket then suddenly yelled, "Hey, I cut my finger on a razor blade"! Grandmother nodded and said, "Just another example of the Lord's wisdom. Just think, if your eye had been on the end of your finger, it would have been cut off". My sister quickly replied, "Yes, but if my eye had been on the end of my finger, I'd have <u>seen</u> that razor". Grammer laughed and hugged her mumbling something that sounded like "Good thinker" -- or was it "little stinker"?

Never a pushover, and always champion of the underdog, grandmother was highly respected and, in some cases, even feared. One time when a neighbor was beating his dog unmercifully, she took her

riding crop and went over and gave the man a few wallops of his own. Then, she told him that if she ever heard the dog crying again, she would come back with the horsewhip. The man just stood and stared, amazed, because Grammer was only about five feet tall and weighed not much over a hundred pounds. But we never heard the dog yelping again.

On a real windy day, a customer was refused milk because her bucket did not have a lid and grandmother was sure that trash and sand would blow into the milk. However, she finally sold her the milk anyway. In just a few minutes, the woman came back, mad and talking ugly about the "dirty milk" she'd been sold, demanding her money back. "Why, of course," grandmother said as she gave the woman her dime back then poured the bucket of milk over the woman's head.

Another time, my twin and I jumped from one cool grass clump to another down to the butcher shop for a quarter's worth of round steak -- enough for six of us! When we got home, Grammer sent us right back with a note: "I don't mind spending twenty-five cents for meat, but I won't pay that much for fat and bone".

When we started to school, all the children had to walk, and some of us had to walk through a rough neighborhood. Many times, some of the children were chased and threatened with chains and sticks by a gang of toughs. Once, when the gang came running to chase my twin and me, the leader yelled, "Hey! We don't bother them, them's Mrs. Knipp's children!" I never knew why. Was it because they were afraid of her, or was it because only the week before she had taken hot soup and fresh bread to one of their families?

Directly across the street from us lived a Mr. and Mrs. Meyers.

He was a man who beat and abused his wife regularly -- usually when he was drunk. On one occasion, he held her hands on the hot stove because she had called my twin and me over and had given us hot, buttered and sugared slices of bread. One night, we called to grandmother and told her that someone was under our bed. Grammer grabbed the broom and, thinking we were imagining things, swept the broom under the bed and yelled, "Get out of here!" -- and out crawled little Mrs. Meyers. She was trembling and hysterical saying that her husband had come at her with his razor and was threatening to kill her. About that time we heard a pounding on the front porch, and there stood Mr. Meyers. He'd come after his wife, a lantern in one hand and a straight-edged razor in the other. Grandmother went to the closet, got the shotgun and gave him one minute to get out of the gate! Poor little Mrs. Meyers! They moved away and we did not hear from them for ten years. Then a telegram came from her that simply read, "Thank God, he's dead!"

The last ten years of Grammer's life were tragic because she was bedridden with what doctors diagnosed as inflamation of the spine. She suffered terribly, but never did we see her cry or bemoan her fate. She was completely lucid at all times, but then she'd forget some things. Kathryn came up from Baton Rouge where she taught at Louisiana State University, to show grandmother her new baby. When Grammer asked whose baby it was, Kathryn replied, "It's my baby, I'm married now". Grammer cut her eyes around and said, "High time".

The many kindnesses that grandmother had shown to others were repaid a hundred-fold. Not many days went by that someone wasn't there to visit and bring food or a gift. Although we had a woman

and her son living with, and caring for, Grammer and Grampa, the friends and neighbors helped with the garden and yard -- especially that part that could be seen from the bedroom windows. It worried Grammer to see things ill-kept.

The day that Grampa died, we all came from our various teaching positions determined to act cheerful when around Grammer. But she called us in to her bedside and said, "Quit pussy-footing around. I know Pete's dead because I saw old big-foot Brown come up the walk. Don't be sad for me because my greatest fear has been that I'd die and leave him all alone. Now he's gone, and I'm so glad because now I can go, too".

Six days later, her wish was granted. As was her custom, she was reading the morning paper after her breakfast when she quietly folded the paper, put it aside and said, "I'm so tired, I think I'll take a little nap".